~~Nov 6 1910~~ The Unitarian Protest *

Howard N Brown

"There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

1 Timothy 2 - 5

It is said that there is, in these times, almost no general interest in theological questions; ~~and that is rather hard to credit that assertion~~, Nevertheless, I desire to speak for a few moments of a point in theology, on which has been, in the past, a matter of great public concern. I wish to do this interest; by way of showing that the protest on which this Church took its stand, some one hundred and twenty five years ago, (it being then the first of all American Churches to assume that attitude), embodied something more than a mistaken idea,

An honored and distinguished representative of what is, in some respects, the most modern of modern thought in religion, has lately said, in print, that he is unable to see why any man who thinks resolutely should fail to ~~be~~ hesitate to affirm the Deity of Jesus Christ. ~~from simple reasons about affirming this Deity of Christ~~,

It is quite obvious that many, ~~of the~~ of whom it might be supposed that, by inheritance or otherwise, they

* a sermon in King's Chapel.

FPG 2012-010-058

would hold such a scruple, have ceased to entertain it;
and in certain quarters it appears to be taken for granted
that the protest of which I have spoken, ~~in which Hooker~~
~~stood~~ by the way, must presently disappear from the
thought of this Church.

It is plain, too, that times have greatly changed
since this Church altered its ancient Book of Prayer
and ceased to address its petitions to Christ, as God. For
this Author whom I have quoted, while he affirms the
deity of Christ, affirms also, (and apparently without
change of meaning in the term), the deity in the
spiritual side of human nature everywhere. Certainly
had one been allowed to say that in the Church, a
century ago, the Unitarian controversy would have been
in large measure forestalled.

For me, I have been accustomed to say that I cared
not in what highest heaven the human author of our
faith might be enthroned, so long as an open door
were left his disciples to follow where he had gone
before, and enter into the glory he had won. This
now appears to be fully granted by men, who regard
the Unitarian protest as being somewhat overstrained.

But I must think that, as a matter of public
policy ~~in the Church~~, there is still a valid ground
for that same scruple, about affirming the deity

of Christ, on which this Church once took its stand; ~~and that in the theological point which I desire in a few words, to set forth.~~

I will remember a striking discourse, on a given by Dr. Hodge in his later years on Idolatry; the main thought of which may serve to illustrate the view I mean to uphold. Dr. Hodge took the position, then somewhat novel among Protestant Christians, that the use of images in popular religion, the world over, was legitimate and necessary. Idolatry, defined as the employment of such symbols in worship, so far from being a sin, was in his opinion essential to the very existence of religion, at least in the earlier stages of human development.

(The childish mind requires these images, in order to concentrate its thought and feeling on any object of worship whatever. And, on their better side, the so called heathen religions ought not to be judged as if they really "bowed down to wood and stone;" — because, in truth, they were looking through the symbol to a greater power beyond. The image was to them as a kind of ~~image~~ window into the unseen.)

(Among ancient peoples, the Jew was the only person able to hold his faith without ~~any~~ assistance ~~whatever~~ from the use of Idols; and he was a man

so exceptional in character that he should not be
made a rule by which to judge the rest of mankind.

At the same time Dr. Hodge pointed out the
very great danger to which idolatry is always
exposed. It is difficult to determine, in any given
case, how far the worshipper looks through his idol,
to a mysterious presence behind it, of which the idol is
only a token; and to what extent he so identifies the
visible figure with an invisible power, that his
fetish becomes, in itself, the source whence he expects
to derive help.

But, though it may be impossible to locate
that line of division, the line nevertheless exists; and
it marks the distinction between two kinds of religion;
one of which has an upward tendency, while the other
tends just as surely in a downward way. Such
use, for example, as the Catholic Church makes of
images is good and helpful, in so far as these things
serve to direct the thoughts of people to what is
greater than they. But the moment when people
begin to pray only to the images themselves, religion
is debased from its proper place. It becomes no better than a
superstition, and, as such, tends continually to sink
to lower and lower levels of unreason and

absurdity. The Jew then, of old times was not a mere fanatic in his hatred of idolatry. He may not have possessed much sympathetic insight by which to interpret what was best in the religions surrounding him, but he saw perfectly, and truly, the awful peril contained in them. For which religion of the latter sort has always been the chief inspiration of mankind, religion of this baser kind has been a fearful hindrance and curse, in the life of many peoples.

The Jew would not tolerate the use of any graven image whatever, Whether or not he understood why these things were, often bad, he clearly discerned that they did produce bad consequences; and for long centuries he maintained a single-handed, sometimes a despairing effort against them; by which courageous struggle he has put the whole human race infinitely in his debt.

Now if anything stands clear and plain in the teachings of Christ it is that he meant to serve for his immediate followers, and for all who should believe on him, as a way to God. It is quite possible then, is it not? that in Christianity we shall find the same two tendencies that are to be noted in all other of the great religions, that is to say there will be one type of mind which uses "the way"

as a road to some higher end, and another type of mind which uses "the way" as if it were itself the goal and end. Then is the Christianity which so far distinguishes between Christ and God that it looks through the Son to the Father; and then is the Christianity for which the Son practically is the Father, so that when the soul has reached Christ there is no further journey that it needs to go.

~~And~~ Not for one moment would I seem to say that this distinction is only a matter of dogma, or that in actual life it can be always clearly pointed out. I would not deny that there has been a very real & beautiful and inspiring piety where the identification of Christ and God has seemed to be most complete, & he was a good and great man who said that "Jesus Christ was the only God he knew."

But I do say that in this identification there is a certain peril to the western mind; that among the masses of men it may anywhere be the beginning of those downward courses in religion which have wrought such havoc in the Christian Church; and that wherever somebody will have to make, over again, in the modern world, somewhat the same fight that this Jew made in the ancient world, to

for deliverance from what amounts only to ~~of~~ ~~all, is but~~ a higher kind of idolatry.

It is, without doubt, almost immeasurable gain when in place of ~~an~~ those marble statues, ~~a supreme triumph of the sculptor's art~~, which once adorned Greek cities, the world has put such a figure as that of Christ, to be seen only with the eye of the mind, as its object of worship. And yet the same question that is used to distinguish between the good and bad sides of Paganism may also be employed, with profit, to mark a distinction in Christian life.)

Is this human figure "very God;" or is it a finite form through which one looks up toward the infinite, above and beyond our sight? To many, no doubt, it can be something of both. But to the vast majority, I suspect, the identification of Christ and God will mean that Christ is all the God they know; and that loss of the infinite background against which the person of Christ should be seen, seems to me to open the door to tendencies in the church which are bound to produce unfortunate results.

In individual cases it may be difficult, or impossible, to note these tendencies. But in the

broad way, — as a matter of public policy, — I hold that in affirming the Deity of Christ the church stands on that same dangerous ground which has so often proven a quicksand to the feet of religion.

(There is therefore, I think, still a reasonable scruple to be entertained against making that affirmation; for I judge that the same weary, and often, apparently, hopeless contest which the Jews maintained of old, may in the Ancient days will have to be waged by somebody in coming time, to deliver Christianity from that peril.

It is now a subject for much congratulation, with many people, that the chasm between God and man has at last been closed up. Well, if our talks of chasms, yes! But surely the existence of a veiled difference does not imply the existence of a yawning and impassable gulf of separation. It seems to be difficult for humanity to do anything without overdoing it: and the effort to bring God and man more closely together appears to end, here and there, by making them all one.)

(The humanizing of Deity, though both good and inviolable, within certain limits, when

pushed too far becomes a positive disaster to faith.
Books have been published, in recent time, Emanating Even
from seats of Theological learning, which leave on gasping
with astonishment at the limitations to which modern
Christian sometimes ~~and~~ subjects itself.)

(To the more sober sense of this world the life of
God and the life of men will always seem different.
One may be in the likeness of the other; but no human
personality can answer to our highest thought of what
God must be; and if all we can think or know of
Deity is to be put within the compass of the
mind of our race, then we lose the supreme beauty
and mystery for which the name of God should stand.

On the whole there can not well be a better
statement of what appears to me the real heart and essence of Christian
faith than that which we have taken for a text;
and if the Christian world might walk by its light,
then would be deliverance from all sorts of fallacies
and false schemes. "There is one God, and one Mediator
between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."

(Here on our ~~earth~~ in our own lower place;
the supreme work of creation, indeed. so far as we can
know what creation is; but held within narrow limits.

beyond
which, as yet, we cannot pass. And over us
somewhere, near or far, we feel that there must be a
greater life and power, out of which we and all things
in this wondrous universe have come. This Deity may
be close to us, but we see him not, Heaven may
be nearer to us than the clouds above our heads,
but its invisible gates appear to be shut against our
longing eyes.)

(And between these two realms, for the Christian
believer at least, stands one whom ~~in some sense~~, God
has ~~sent, a man whom He~~ raised up to be a link
between earth and heaven; a light to human hearts
of the love and peace and glory beyond their sight:
a hand to raise them as they climb, through doubts
and fears, to what they still believe to be their
proper home.

Our great name for Christ, in the Church,
perhaps the greatest, has always been that of "Mediator."
He is the Savior of men because he thus stands to
them as a means of communion between the earthly
and the spiritual worlds. Religion has its great
office; its main excuse for being is the fact
that it has, or is believed to have, some ability
to put men in closer touch with that realm

of the spirit which is other than the realm of flesh and sense. Take away the idea that however God may be here, when our consciousness now abides, there are, so to speak, larger spaces outside where he may be more abundantly found, and religion is dead at the root. The church is nothing but a survival from ancient superstitions, unless new life can be brought by its agency from some interior world, which without such aid the mass of men is only likely to mock.

Such mediation, in the most cherished belief of devout Christians, Christ can, and does, effect. And surely it may be pointed out that, as mediator, he ought not to be so closely identified with either the divine or the human realm. Whence he came from, and whoever he was, he could only perform what Christendom has need to be his great work by coming into some middle place, (in efficiency at least) between God, and man, and less than God, he was more than man.

We do not say of him that he was a "mere man"; because it appears to us that, through divine grace, the potentialities of human nature were so suddenly and so completely filled in him, as to raise him to heights, which ordinary men, for ages

yet may be unable to ~~find~~ attain. And how can we say of him that he was God: that, being in the form of a man, his being was coextensive with that of the infinite Father whom he loved and served?

With regard to that mediation which we Christians look to find through him, there may be much change of belief without damage to the essential idea of what such office is. Formerly it was held that he was the only person through whom human beings could be brought near to God; that his was the only name through which any soul could be saved. But that is in no wise necessary to Christian faith. It was Paul who said that God had not left himself without a witness in any time or place; and more and more, I think, will any longer say that the great races of the East, untouched by Christianity, have had only false prophets, and have no Mediator of their own to help them lay hold upon a divine presence.

Formerly it was supposed that at least a large part of the work of Christ was to appease the wrath of God, which had been kindled against his rebellious children; to bring him to forgive and receive back to his favor the penitent soul. All that misunderstanding is rapidly

passing away ~~from the temple of his Church~~.
One perceives that Him may be numbskulls among
ideas as to what he is doing, or has done, standing
between God and man, without altering the fact that
he does occupy that place, and has wrought
mightily for human benefit.

Perhaps we now see far from understanding,
adequately, either this divine grace or this human need
which he has brought together. But at least it
may be claimed that Christians can begin to see
with clearer eyes, and give a more reasonable
account of the faith that is in them;

For one thing we can perceive that Him has
been through Christ a mediation, to the
world's intelligence, of truths in themselves too great
for any human mind to grasp. Who could know,
by gazing steadfastly at the Sun, so much as
that the great "Orb of Day" was then some by the
least to his poor organs of sight, that
dominating center of our system of worlds is to us
no more than a confused blur, and blinding glare,
unless we have something between ourselves and
it, through which its overmastering rays may fall.
Even so, if we try to turn our Spiritual gaze

directly toward infinity, we are apt to experience only
hurt to our minds. Try to conceive, in any respect,
what eternity and infinity must be, and the mind
is all at sea, bewildered, and appalled by the futility of its
endeavor. I know nothing more painful than to try
to comprehend an endless universe. It is like a
staggering blow to think that there is no end to
the multitude of worlds, while our thought can only
compass what has a beginning and an end.

So of the Infinite Mind: it dwells, as Christ's great
apostle said, in a "light which no man can approach
unto." And it was that same Apostle who, by a most
suggestive figures of speech, gave a clue to those
beliefs which have since been so much to the Christian
world. "Beholding as in a glass the glory of the
Lord"! God hath shined in our hearts to give the
light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the
face of Jesus Christ."

At the least this great soul walked
so close with God, and had its conversation so
much in heaven, that something of the radiance of
that celestial sphere clung to it, as a visible
appearance among men. Still more, it is given
us to think that the great Spirit, Life of all
things, shining through this wondrous

personality, not only gave beauty to the form that had an earthly origin, but revealed to human sight something of its own hidden divine perfections. For when the light falls through richly colored windows into dim cathedral interiors, it is not only that these marvelous tints on these on the painted glass; it is that they are somehow contained in the pure white light itself, and doubtless might be found therein by eyes with full capacity to see, without such mediation.

And thus the familiar lines from our own poet admirably express one side of the faith of Christian hearts:

> "So to our Master seen subdued,
> Yet veiled, but not concealed,
> We know in Him the Father God
> And heart of God revealed."

And is there not a still deeper sense that we need to have performed for our benefit. As we get away from that crass materialism which will have it that all the strength we possess come to us through chemical transformations out of the food we eat, we have a growing feeling that our life must be fed through many secret springs. And if an infinite Spirit may directly touch our spirits, to send into them comfort and healing and help, then the point of

contact, when such new life may pass, becomes
to us an affair of momentous importance. Then on theories,
to be sure, that we have nothing to do about this; that
it is altogether God's concern and he will look after it,
all kinds of mediation between God and the soul, are
~~are sometimes said to be~~
sometimes said to be needless; or worse than
needless, even intrusive and pernicious.

If any have this hindrance to ~~be~~ live by
such theories we need not quarrel with their
experiment. But I am sure that this matter
does not thus stand in the experience of mankind.
There are means and agencies through which the
soul is helped to come into such relations with
the Spiritual world that spiritual power may
flow into it.

Somehow, to come near to Christ has been
to draw closer to God. Somehow, being in sympathy
with him, and, in our poor fashion, attuned to his
spirit has availed to draw from heaven the
divine spark that has kindled anew many a
fainting, failing heart. We may know but little of
these deep matters; yet I can conceive of nothing
more shallow, even in a day of rampant

superficiality, than the theorizing which sets aside the whole religious experience of our race, as if it were utterly destitute of significance, a race which has sought, through uncounted generations, and with a persistence it has seldom manifested elsewhere, for help from heaven, yet has received nothing in return, and has learned nothing all these years, through continual failure - is not such a race as I myself can understand. That, to a sad extent, it has sought blindly and foolishly is sufficiently evident upon the face of the record. But there must have been some finding to keep up its heart and courage: otherwise the humanity of the past has been so foolish that I see not how this boastful season of the present day could be its child or than earlier generations.

There is something in religious experience which has been deeply precious and helpful to the souls of men. And whatever that something may be, the person and the influence of Christ have been a most effective means of its attainment. That he is more only mediator I do not dare to say. But that, for people born and reared as we have been, he is the greatest friend to those "who would live and walk in the spirit;" the most certain guide for those who wish to approach the infinite presence, I hold

to be, beyond question, true. I could very easily figure
him as a great chief of souls, dwelling in that undiscovered
country before us; and, as such, I should not be ashamed
to pray to him, as my Catholic friend would pray to his
patron saint. But so thinking of him, I seem to
remove myself too much from the atmosphere of gentleness and
grace which belonged to that beautiful life in Palestine.

And if I call him God, — that is as if I were
to leave the interior of my holy place, where light
falls through the great window looking toward the
East, and go round to view it from the other side,
of the window where the richness of the colors is
mostly lost.

To me therefore he shall be simply "the man,
Christ Jesus"; yet however he may be fitted to his
place in the world's customary order, I shall believe
that the wisdom of God has given him a high position
in a higher spiritual order; that not by
accident, or fate, but by divine decree, he came
to break the bread of life to hungry souls, and to be
for you and me, a mediator between Earth and Heaven.